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ABSTRACT

A survey designed to identify perceived educational needs in a large suburban school district was administered to a representative sample of elementary teachers, junior high teachers, senior high teachers, special education teachers, junior high students, senior high students, and parents. Intercorrelation and factor analysis of the data revealed two distinct clusters of attitudes and perceptions identified as "all adults" and "all students." Survey findings indicate that students desired more knowledge of career opportunities and wider cultural experiences, while adults emphasized the importance of reading and writing skills. Both students and adults felt it was important for students to develop a good self-concept, though adults stressed that need more than students. (Author/JG)

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Educational Needs as Perceived by Seven Constituencies in Education

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Introduction

Planning and evaluation in association with an overall Title I project in a large suburban school district led to the realization that the district lacked a systematic investigation of the input from its various constituencies regarding the educational needs of students within the district. The potential worth of this kind of information lay not only in the intrinsic desirability of knowing what educational needs there were in the district but also in the fact that gathering such data was increasingly a required component of any request for funds made to the federal government, such requests not being restricted to Title I. Thus, the general absence of data on educational needs within the district prompted the design and execution of the study reported here.

Initially the study was intended to provide some basis for decision making regarding the priority of funding and staffing of the various instructional and support components of the districts' overall educational effort. Samples of seven groups all directly concerned with the kind and quality of educational programs offered by the district were examined.

This investigation was constructed so that the interrelationship of need ranks by types of educators, parents, and types of students could be examined. It is well to remember that the primary question was concerned with the types of needs children have in school, and the list of investigated needs is neither inclusive nor exhaustive.

The investigation was conducted in a large suburban school district located on the perimeter of a northwestern city. Within the district there

are 46 schools employing approximately 1,500 professional staff. The socio-economic level of the district is quite varied, with several school areas serving professional people and the upper economic reaches of society. These are contrasted with eight schools that easily exceed criteria for Title I aid.

Procedure

A needs assessment instrument was constructed by examining file data maintained by the district in which the major thrust was to give district patrons an opportunity to feedback perceived goals. Several hundred parents and non-parents had responded giving a broad picture of community needs and expectations. The top nine goals from this survey were used as a basis for a needs assessment instrument. To these were added nine needs generated by the authors and a group of teachers. The needs were reviewed by district professional staff and put into language appropriate for students and adults. One open-ended need was included in expectations of finding new and specific needs. The needs are presented in Table I. In order to make the task more easily comprehensible, and to increase the percentage returns, respondents were instructed to list the three most important needs and the three least important needs in rank form on the survey instrument.

The instrument was distributed to 1,000 subjects, either by U.S. mail or through appropriate channels within district methods. The samples were drawn randomly and proportionately through use of the district computer service. An approximate 50 per cent return was obtained with higher proportions (70 per cent) found with professional staff and students. There was a 40 per cent return from parents. The relatively low parent return rate may restrict generalizations but is nevertheless higher than the return found by the authors in similar urban districts, where 15 to 30 per cent return is common. Reminders were distributed to the general professional staff. Students from the randomly selected schools

responded in special assembly. No reminders were used with parents. Categories of respondents were: elementary teachers, junior high teachers, senior high teachers, special ed. teachers, parents (not defined by student level), junior high students and senior high students.

Method

The returned instruments were converted to need ranks within each category of respondent. The seven resultant columns of needs were intercorrelated utilizing Spearman rank order correlations. The resultant seven by seven matrix was factor analyzed utilizing the BMD 03M procedure with squared multiple correlations used as communality estimates.

Because a rank order matrix was entered in the program and because there is wide variation in row column n's, it is prudent to recognize the impact of this procedure on any population estimates.

Results

The needs ranks for each constituency and for the total group are presented in Table I. There is general agreement among all groups that students in the school system need improved self-confidence and improved reading skills. Discrepancies that may be predicted as a function of either the target population or the respondent population were found. It is interesting to note that the elementary teachers are most discrepant from the teacher group in terms of less interest in the need for improved understanding of the world of work and less need for their students to have increased positive attitude towards school. This may well be a function of the age of their target students.

The intercorrelation matrix for the seven groups is presented in Table II. Any correlation greater than .5 is significantly different from 0 in the two variable cases. The major observation from the table is that the student group

co-vary while the teachers and parents co-vary as a distinct group. This leads to a decision to factor analyze. The verimax rotated factors presented in Table III represent a rather clear structure defining two factors explaining 73 per cent of the variance in the correlation matrix. The first factor may be named adult perceived needs and explains 60 per cent of the common variance in the matrix. The second factor may be called student perceived needs and explains 14 per cent of the variance in the matrix. The unexpected result was the relationship between parents and teachers in terms of perceived needs. The apparent difference between elementary teachers and the remainder of the adult sample may depend entirely on the improved understanding of the work career opportunities questions.

Discussion

The conclusions based upon a descriptive needs study must be examined with great caution because the population investigated and the independent samples of needs may vary greatly from those found in this study. It should be obvious that different clusters of needs placed on a survey instrument might produce different intercorrelation patterns. The general need for an improved self concept and the adult perceived need for increased reading skills may drive a correlation matrix to the solution we obtained. It would be instructive to develop a need instrument that grants the need for improved self concept and grants the need for improved reading skills, and then investigates the need structure under these common elements. With the above cautions well in mind we can proceed.

It became apparent that need structure was not unifactor across groups and certain conflicts may be generated by differential need perception. Considerable information is known concerning general needs from the point of view of educators and adults. Also noteworthy is the conflict between the adult and student groups within this district. Students are very interested in exploring

wider cultural ventures and in examining the world of work they may be entering. Should these perceived needs be more firmly established, it might point the way for increased student motivation.

The adult concern for improved self concepts are shared by the students. It is interesting to note that students tend to play down the need for basic skills, perhaps because they feel adequately prepared in this area.

Within this district the major point of conflict between parents and all other constituencies seems to center around math skills, with parents perceiving this as a more important need.

TABLE I

Ranked Needs as Perceived by
Seven Constituencies in Education

NEED FOR	Rank by Total Group	Elem. Teacher	Jr. High Teacher	Sr. High Teacher	Spec. Ed. Teacher	Parents	Sr. High Students	Jr. High Students
Improved self concept	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	6
Improved reading skill	2	3	2	3	3	1	8	11
Improved communication skill	3	6	3	2	2	4	6	13
Improved understanding of work career oppor.	4	18	9	5	6	6	1	1
Positive identification with school	5	11	4	6	8	10	7	3
Free response	6	9	12	8	8	5	5	5
Positive contacts with adult models	7	7	5	4	4	14	9	11
Better social interactions	8	4	9	10	10	16	4	2
Good mental health	9	2	6	10	5	8	14	11
Improved physical health	10	9	9	8	11	11	15	7
Improved math skills	11	9	13	15	10	4	12	15
Increased ability to listen	12	6	15	12	14	14	10	8
An adequate diet	13	13	7	10	12	9	17	11
Wider cultural experiences	14	14	15	17	17	12	3	4
Improved writing skills	15	12	9	13	13	8	12	17
Effective use of leisure time	16	16	17	15	16	18	12	15
Improved questioning skills	17	18	16	16	15	16	16	15
Adequate clothing	18	16	18	18	18	17	18	18
N	412	58	48	47	20	123	54	62

Ties rounded to a whole number.

TABLE II

		Elem. Teacher	Jr. High Teacher	Sr. High Teacher	Spec. Ed. Teacher	Parents	Sr. High Students	Jr. High Students
Elementary Teachers	1	(58)	65	58	70	40	28	21
Jr. High Teachers	2		(86)	89	89	66	39	36
Sr. High Teachers	3			(91)	92	61	52	44
Spec. Ed. Teachers	4				(93)	73	56	33
Parents	5					(67)	46	16
Sr. High Students	6						(71)	73
Jr. High Students	7							(65)

The diagonal represents squared multiple correlations.

TABLE III

Rotated Factor Matrix of Interrelationship of Constituencies' Perceived Needs

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	h^2
1. Elementary Teachers	.66	.12	.44
2. Secondary Teachers	.91	.21	.87
3. Jr. High Teachers	.85	.35	.85
4. Special Ed. Teachers	.97	.24	.99
5. Parents	.67	.19	.48
6. Jr. High Students	.30	.83	.78
7. Sr. High Students	.15	.83	.70

Variance explained: Factor 1 = 59%
Factor 2 = 14%
Factor 3 =.03%